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1961/03/15

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 15, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Cuba

1. Free elections statement. Tom Mann, on further consideration, has backed away from the idea of a demarche on free elections. He argues that the risk is too great that Castro might accept the challenge, stage ostensibly free elections, win by a large majority and thereafter claim popular sanction for his regime. Mann points out that a genuinely free election requires more than freedom of balloting; it requires freedom of press and assembly for some months prior to the election. Without such prior freedom from intimidation, the election itself will not be genuinely free, even with OAS supervision of the actual voting process.

I agree with this view. It does seem to me that setting up free elections as a test might give Castro an opportunity to put on a show and recover prestige.

2. White Paper. I am at work on a White Paper on Cuba. I wonder, however, whether we should not consider issuing at the same time a White Paper on the Dominican Republic. This would emphasize the fact that our opposition is to dictatorship in principle and not just to dictatorships which expropriate US business. Tom Mann agrees that it might be a good idea to issue a simultaneous White Paper on the Dominican Republic.

If you agree, let me know, and I will get someone at State to start putting the material together.

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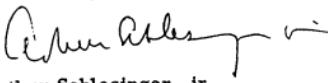
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3. Cuban policy. I thought your response to the proposals submitted last Saturday was absolutely right. The trouble with the operation is that the less the military risk, the greater the political risk, and vice versa. It seems to me that the utilization of the men under conditions of minimum political risk is clearly the thing to aim at.

I had the impression that the military aspects of the problem had received more thoughtful attention than the political aspects. It did not seem to me that the political risks had been adequately assessed or that convincing plans had been laid to minimize them. For example, it was not clear that anyone had thought through the question of our public response if the operation should be undertaken. Do we take the public position that it is a spontaneous Cuban enterprise? Do you say in your press conference, for example, that the US had nothing to do with it? Do we swear this in the United Nations? What happens then when Castro produces a couple of prisoners who testify that they were armed, trained and briefed by Americans? Do we continue to deny this? or change our original story?

It would seem to me absolutely essential to work out in advance a consistent line which can hold for every conceivable contingency. Otherwise we will find ourselves in a new U-2 imbroglio, with the government either changing its story midstream or else clinging to a position which the rest of the world will regard as a lie.

I should add that there seems to me a slight danger of our being rushed into something because CIA has on its hands a band of people it doesn't quite know what to do with. When you were out of the room, Allen Dulles said, "Don't forget that we have a disposal problem. If we have to take these men out of Guatemala, we will have to transfer them to the US, and we can't have them wandering around the country telling everyone what they have been doing." Obviously this is a genuine problem, but it can't be permitted to govern US policy.


Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.